

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: June 9, 2016

Agenda Item: Veebaray Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Grazing System (R7)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Proposed

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Min

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Background

Montana statute (MCA 87-1-248(5)(a)) sets a spending cap for project expenditures through the Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (UGBHEP), which requires FW Commission approval for projects exceeding \$100,000. FWP proposes to enter into a 21- year UGBHEP agreement with Veebaray Company Ranches (the landowners) located near Enid, MT. The project would develop stock water sources and other improvements to implement 3, 3-pasture summer rest rotation grazing systems on 12,145 acres of the Veebaray Ranch. Total estimated project cost would be \$369,130 with costs being split between the UGBHEP (\$179,565), the landowners (\$179,565), and American Bird Conservancy (\$10,000). The intent of this agreement is to develop a partnership between FWP and a private landowner to improve native habitats for the benefit of wildlife, primarily upland game birds, and to simultaneously provide public upland game bird hunting opportunities.

Veebaray Company would like to implement rest-rotational grazing to better distribute cattle and enhance rangeland health. This property supports extensive woody draws and associated shrub-grassland habitats, but historic grazing management limited the productivity of these habitats for wildlife. Establishment of this system would provide rest and deferred grazing treatments, directly enhancing nesting, brood, and wintering habitat for upland game birds while improving the productivity and extent of perennial grasses, forbs, and brushy cover. Wildlife and livestock would both benefit from improvement in the overall health and carrying capacity of the range. This proposed project aligns with priorities identified in Region 7's UGBEP Strategic Plan, including the regional goal to "*Develop and maintain grazing management projects to improve and/or maintain productive nesting and brood rearing cover. Enhance or provide critical winter habitat. Enhance public recreational opportunities.*" Sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants, partridge, and wild turkeys are expected to benefit from this proposal.

Public Involvement Process & Results

This proposal has been provided to the UGBHEP Council for their review and recommendations. If endorsed by the Commission, FWP intends to bring this proposal back to the Commission for final approval in July. This will require a shorter than normal public comment period (approx. 2 weeks). The reason for shorter review, the landowner intends on getting started on all aspects of this work during the summer to facilitate project completion and subsequent rest-rotation of cattle in a timely manner.

Alternatives and Analysis

The proposed action is to proceed with this UGBHEP project. The alternative would be to forego this opportunity to develop a long term partnership between MFWP and a private landowner to improve native habitats for the benefit of wildlife and enhance public recreational opportunities.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the Commission endorse proceeding with this UGBHEP project, which would include a public comment period prior to final Commission approval.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission endorse for public comment the Veebaray Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program grazing system proposal.